

# **SIKHISM : ITS PHILOSOPHY AND HISTORY**

**A REVIEW BY N. MUTHUMOHAN**



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*Edited by Daljeet Singh and Kharak Singh*

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This is yet another wonderful work of the Institute of Sikh Studies, Chandigarh. The work is encyclopaedic, covering Sikh philosophy, institutions, history and responses to certain recent controversies. The book has been excellently edited by Daljeet Singh and Kharak Singh, and authored by dozens of Sikh scholars like Kapur Singh, Daljeet Singh, Jagjit Singh, Avtar Singh, Kharak Singh and their younger generation. The book is printed on high quality paper and gives a pleasurable reading.

It is interesting here to note the occasion of the publication of the book. (i) Above all, there is a revival of interest in Sikh religion. This has happened after the tragic events in

the recent history of the Sikhs. (ii) The meta-narrative construction of Indian Nation and Indian Nationalism is fastly reaching its crisis. Consequently, every culture is persuaded to revisit and assert its own spirit and identity. (iii) There is a new wave of broadening democracy. The erstwhile marginalised people such as the Dalits, women, oppressed nations, federal forces, ethno-groups, etc., are coming forward and making their assertion in the sharing of power. Sikhism and the Sikhs have a rightful place in this crusade and the present book is a contribution to that effect.

The first two parts of the book enunciate the doctrinal basis of Sikhism and its originality and distinctness from earlier Indian traditions. Chapters included in these parts explain with remarkable clarity the methodology required and meaning of Sikh concepts such as Oneness of God, reality of the World, the principle of *miri-piri*, notions of *Naam*, *haumain*, *sant-sipahi*, Khalsa, etc. It is this conceptual apparatus which renders the philosophical foundation to the Sikh identity.

The ideological part of the book is clear enough to state that Sikhism cannot be understood properly within the traditional framework of dichotomy of spirituality and temporality and thus creating a new paradigm of unity of spirituality and earthliness, otherwise called a whole-life philosophy. In this newly created space, God is not only transcendent, but also immanent in life. An one-sided transcendent idea of God is the characteristic feature of Brahminic Vedantic thought (*Neti marga*) and it fails to

work out an ethical criterion for earthly life. Daljeet Singh says, "The Immanence of God is important. It emphasises the spiritual and meaningful character of the Universe and life's capacity for relationship with God." [p. 21]. "Sikhism proclaims the dynamic reality and authenticity of the world and life. ...The world being real, creative work and virtuous deeds are of fundamental importance." [p. 24].

The medieval Hindu *bhakti* too, it must be accepted, rendered certain amount of (relative) reality to world and earthly life. This got expressed in its pantheistic positions. Bhakti in its polemics with intuitive *jnana*, gave priority to emotions and affective nature of man. However, it stopped before praxis and ethics. ".....*bhakti* is a loving affection. It is neither knowledge nor action.... It does not depend, as knowledge does, upon an effort of the will. Hence, as it is not an action, its fruit (beatitude) is endless." [p. 256]. Consequently, *bhakti* did not acquire the capacity to transform the society, nor could it direct the human faculty of cognition towards that end. But Sikh thought grew beyond *bhakti*. Standing firmly on the ground of universal love, Sikhism worked out the concepts of socio-ethical praxis and knowledge, and made them inalienable parts of the former. Kapur Singh says, ".....Sikhism postulates that religious activity must be practised in the socio-political context of the world, the problem of evil is very much a real problem to Sikhism....." (p. 94). "Sikhism, however, raises ethical conduct to a higher and more independent, absolute status, and makes it as the true expression of the harmony of human personality with the Will of God." [p. 91]. Kharak Singh asserts, "Guru Nanak is the first man of God in India,

who introduced the concept of resistance against injustice as a moral value for a man of religion." [p. 139]. Gurtej Singh further confirms, ".....this world as real and a legitimate sphere of activity for a man of religion" [p. 165]. ".....spiritual progress is possible only in society" [p. 166].

It is in this spirit of the principle of *miri-piri*, that the Sikh concepts of *Naam*, *haumain*, etc., are enunciated in the book. Daljeet Singh calls *Naam* as the Ever-Creative Immanence of God in World and in worldly activities, and it means God's interest in life.

The concept of *haumain* too finds an interesting discussion in the volume, first as the principle of individuation and thus becoming the source of evolution and later turning into its opposite thus becoming ego, individualism, non-relatedness and so the malady of mankind. The remedy is that man as a grown-up being must use his capacity to link himself with God and the social environment.

Avtar Singh presents a highly original article on Sikh ethics and the hermeneutic tradition of Sikhism. For him, Sikh ethics is the outcome of the dialectics of the spiritual and the temporal. "Anyone interested in knowing the Sikh attitude towards theology has to keep in view the Sikh perception of the concern of God with the social and the ethical. The ethical is the meeting point of God — His knowledge — Man axis." [p. 216]. The author traces this genius of Sikhism all through its history, from Guru Nanak to Guru Gobind Singh, then from Bhai Gurdas through Bhai Vir Singh to modern times.

Thus, the ideological part of the book has found a coherent and systematised presentation in the volume. The reviewer, however, feels that a few more concepts still need Sikh expertise and could be included in a volume on Sikh philosophy. They are the concepts of *hukm*, *sahaj*, *charhdi kala*, the Sikh epistemology (Sikh theory of knowledge), etc. But this is for the future.

Third Section of the book deals with the history and meaning of the Sikh institutions. The following are identified as the basic institutional moments of Sikhism. The Khalsa, the five symbols and *Rahit Maryada*, Guru Granth Sahib, martyrdom and the Sikh attitude to Hindu caste system.

The most important point, here made clear, is that the Sikh institutions are the consciously built up alternatives to the then existing Hindu and Islamic religious and social institutions. They materialise the distinct socio-spiritual message of the Gurus. They express the unity of Sikh theory and praxis and thus the Sikh identity.

Jagjit Singh sees the institution of Khalsa as a coherent and large force of revolutionaries mobilised from the poor and the oppressed. "Had the Guru been guided by the consideration of only meeting the Mughal challenge, he might have come to terms with the hill Rajas. But he did not. This is very significant. His basic objective was to raise the level of the poor and the downtrodden. He wanted these very people to capture political power for themselves." [p. 291]. Khalsa is the organisation of "whole time

revolutionaries". It represents the conscientisation and empowerment of the people. Sikhism ".....has laid great stress on the elimination of individualism" [p. 294]. Khalsa represents an ideal society based on collectivism, equality and dynamism.

The significance and meaning of martyrdom has been discussed by Kharak Singh. The author makes it clear that martyrdom is neither the ascetic denial of life nor the ritualistic sacrifice of blood as they are found in the traditional systems. Sikhism asserts the reality of worldly life and it has no stakes at rituals. Martyrdom is a life of commitment to the cause of love. [p. 306]. It is killing one's own egoism and it expresses a struggle against injustice. [p. 306]. In the present day earthly conditions of structural injustice and oppression, martyrdom represents the real necessity of developing the attitude of fearlessness to death. It is a readiness in defence of love and against non-love and hatred. It is a moment of negation (sacrifice) which is constituted in every assertion (life). Kharak Singh explains his thesis with the lived evidences of the Gurus. He concludes that martyrdom is ".....method of education and training the people for making sacrifices for the cause of righteousness, love and truth" [p. 310].

The article on *Rahit Mayada* and the five symbols of the Sikhs pays special attention to establish that they were installed by the Gurus themselves. The earliest references to Sikh symbols are brought to notice, as well as, the spiritual, ethical and social meaning of the *maryadas* and five symbols. The discussions remind us about the



principle of unity of spirituality and earthliness which forms the basis for Sikh way of living (*maryadas*) and symbols involved.

Harbans Singh elaborates the history of Guru Granth Sahib being established as the Eternal Guru and its significance. The words of the Tenth Master awarding finality to Guru Granth Sahib and its implications are discussed in the article.

Sikh history is a wonderful source of heroism, courage and sacrifice of a great people. It is a people's history with its people's leaders. The Gurus always stood with the people. They expressed the deepest aspirations of people for freedom, dignity and collective living. The Gurus were always interested in broadening the subaltern mass base of the movement. The saintliness and genius of the Gurus were aptly supported by the aspirations of the oppressed and the poor.

The thickest chain of events in the life of the Sikhs in a very short span of historical time is given appropriate space in the volume. Daljeet Singh opens up the discussion covering the Guru-period. He exemplifies the Gurus living their ideology. Lives of the Gurus and the manner they realised their goals in the form of *langar*, *dharamsalas*, mobilisation of the masses infusing a spirit of dignity into an organisation, etc., are enunciated.

The famous historians H.R. Gupta and Ganda Singh dedicate their articles to Guru Gobind Singh creating the

Khalsa and designating of the teaching of Guru Granth Sahib as the foundation of Sikhism. The historians with their erudite lucidity reach the primary sources to establish facts of the crucial period of the Sikh history.

Tharam Singh deals with another heroic period of Sikh history — the post-Guru period. As the historian states, the legendary Banda Singh Bahadur fundamentally transformed the land relations of Punjab in line with the commitments of the Gurus. It was ".....a revolution, which spread across the whole of the Punjab. ....Under Banda Singh, the serfs of the Punjab had their first taste of freedom..... This was the first real blow to the organised exploitation of the Punjab" [pp. 446-7]. "Guru Gobind Singh had sown the seed, and Banda Singh saw it sprout into a healthy sapling." [p. 447]. Tharam Singh also elucidates the very difficult Sikh struggles after the execution of Banda Singh and the *misl* democracy sprouting out during the most difficult period of Sikh history.

G.S. Dhillon, the modern historian of the Sikhs, dedicates three of his articles to the character of Sikh Raj of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the Singh Sabha Movement and Anglo-Sikh relations. The reign of Ranjit Singh has been methodically compared by the author to that of his contemporaries in India as well as in Europe. He brings out the distinct features of the Khalsa Sarkar marked by a sense of justice, humanism, catholicity, peace and prosperity. His quoting of Gardner is remarkable. "The Punjab was not the same, semi-starving, terrified, looted by the rulers, and poorly clothed during his reign. It was a

prosperous, homogeneous and peaceful state with all the communities, Hindu, Muslims and Sikhs, fully satisfied partners in the Government, in military and civil administration, and it was the happiest state communally in Asia" [p. 494]. G.S. Dhillon effectively shows that Ranjit Singh was a characteristic product of the Sikh tradition.

In a similar vein, the author deals with the Singh Sabha Movement and Anglo-Sikh relations. He establishes that the Singh Sabha Movement is not a reformist movement as it is claimed by a few historians, but a revival of the original Sikh spirit marred by some of the historical happenings. The author crisply polemises with H.S. Oberoi's concept of Sanatan Sikhism and shows that the Singh Sabha Movement had a subaltern partisanship and mass following in the true spirit of Sikh religion and tradition.

In the article "Sikhs and the British," G.S. Dhillon refutes the charge fabricated by some historians that the Sikh identity is a making of the British (A similar charge is said about the Dravidian or Tamil identity by the centrist historians). The author revisits the period under discussion and shows with all evidence the enmity fermenting all along between the Sikhs and the British following the annexation of Punjab. Although the British had followed a policy of religious neutrality after the 1857 mutiny, offence on the Sikhs was mounted by liberally accommodating Christian Missionaries in Punjab as well as by supporting the Hinduised *mahants* and *pujaris* of gurdwaras. This resulted in a natural reaction from the Sikhs, and the Singh Sabha Movement came into existence. The author

excellently shows that all pre-Jallianwalla Bagh Movements in Punjab — the Kuka Movement, Singh Sabha Movement, the Ghadarite rebellions and Gurdwara Reform Movement, etc., — were religious in character and only incidentally became a part of Indian National Movement. The arguments developed by the author are in tune with post-modernist historiographic theories which re-visit and re-evaluate the centrist and meta-narrative writing of history.

The last and the concluding part of the book takes the entire issue of Sikh identity to the recent times. There is a systematic ideological campaign against the identity of Sikh thought, its institutions, its scripture, etc. It is done by Eurocentric authors of Christian bias as well as by Indocentric authors of Hindu bias. The motive is the same that it is colonialistic.

The eminent scholar of Sikh studies Noel Q. King opens up the study of the concept of Fundamentalism and shows that the concept is a construction from the point of view of Europe-oriented modernity, rationalism and enlightenment. However, when the ideas of modernity, enlightenment, Western ways, etc., begin to be looked upon with suspicion, the concept of Fundamentalism too needs re-evaluation. Kharak Singh analyses the same problem in the concrete historical conditions which led to the so-called Punjab problem. The author goes through the history and elucidates how the Sikh interests are discarded all along. Many commitments made by the Congress leaders regarding the genuine demands of the Sikhs were

afterwards left unfulfilled, and Sikhs were even refused to be represented by themselves. The argument is lucidly presented that an attitude of internal colonialism is followed by the central government.

James R. Lewis and Kharak Singh in their articles deal with a very important problem of misrepresenting Sikhism in world religious textbooks and Western encyclopaedias. It is really painful to read about the amount and level of misrepresentations of Sikh tradition in these so reputed international editions. As the authors elaborate, there are many silly factual errors as well as more misrepresentations reflecting the conceptual poverty and dirty motives of the writers involved. The authors of the present articles systematically scrutinise the editions and make their critique of them.

Jagjit Singh in his article evaluates a thesis often proclaimed that Sikh militancy is a product of Jats converting into Sikh faith. The author, while asserting that Sikh militancy is an immanent feature of the revolutionary ideology of Sikhism itself, also shows the incompatibility of the way of life of the Jats as an ethnic group and that of Sikhism.

Kharak Singh elucidates another controversy involved with the interpretation of the couplet *Raj Karega Khalsa*. He criticises any attempt to reduce Sikhism into another one of asocial traditional religions. He sharply asks : "Is Sikhism a church of worship alone ? Or is it a church of social policy also ? This is a fundamental question" [p. 675].

The reply of the author naturally is that there is no Sikhism without its principle of *miri-piri*.

Daljeet Singh's article on the authenticity of Kartarpuri Bir is an excellent paper in the context of doubts raised about the authenticity of the Sikh scripture. The author with his first-hand information about the text and the editorial policy of the Fifth Guru, once for all, makes clear the authenticity of the scripture.

Gurtej Singh and Daljeet Singh dedicate two of their articles to yet another problem related with the ideological identity of Sikhism, that is, the internal contradictions observed in *Dasam Granth*. Following the earlier study of Dr Jaggi, the present authors conduct the textual and content analysis of *Dasam Granth* and arrive at the conclusion that ".....such contents of the *Dasam Granth* as suggest worship of gods, goddesses and *avtars* are opposed to the doctrines of Sri Guru Granth Sahib and the Gurus." [p. 720]. They also show that the author could not be a Sikh, there is a clear mix-up of Hindu puranic material with the writings of the tenth Guru.

As it has been already mentioned, the present work, *Sikhism : Its Philosophy and History* is an encyclopaedic work. The most outstanding aspect of the book is its ideological unity and a dauntless commitment to it. The reviewer considers it the most important. Sikhism should not be reduced to another branch of *bhakti* movement. The achievements and originality of Sikhism must be assessed

by the high points it has reached. The present work is a major and a lasting contribution towards this aim.

The publishers inform us that the Sikh community of Singapore, at the initiative of Justice Choor Singh, organised the financial support of the publication. Justice Choor Singh has also given a wonderful introduction to the book. The Sikh community of Singapore deserves the best words of appreciation for its efforts in publishing this excellent work.

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Inaccessible is the Divine Being —  
Say by what device may He be attained ?  
Without form and feature — Say, devotees of God,  
How may He be meditated on ?  
He is formless, immaculate, inaccessible Divine Being —  
In what words may His laudation be sung ?  
To whomsoever He Himself grants realisation,  
On the way of God is guided.  
By the Master perfectly-endowed, is He revealed;  
By service to the Master attained.

Guru Granth Sahib, p. 644